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# *Compliance, Resistance and Pragmatism: the (re)construction of schoolteacher identities in a period of intensive educational reform*

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**ABSTRACT** *Drawing on empirical research, this article explores the ways in which schoolteachers 'reposition' themselves in the face of rapid and extensive educational change, some of which they may view with ambivalence or hostility. Arguing that local responses to public policy are prompting teachers to become increasingly pragmatic in their philosophies and practice, the article identifies and illustrates two distinct forms of pragmatism: 'principled pragmatism', through which teachers who feel generally positive towards recent reforms feel able to strengthen and affirm their pedagogic identities by drawing eclectically on a range of educational practices and traditions; and 'contingent pragmatism', adopted by teachers in oppositional orientations to reform, whereby enforced reactions to policy change take on something of the function of a survival strategy. The article suggests that a consequence—and possible cause—of the adoption of self-consciously pragmatic teacher identities is the effective depoliticisation of teachers through an internalisation of current dominant discourses of compromise.*

## **Introduction: Background and Context**

This article arises out of a major research study that examines the impact on school teachers' practices and perceptions—including, centrally, their perceptions of 'self'—of the interplay between state-driven reform, societal change, and personal and local philosophies of education (Bernstein, 1996). A central feature of the study is to discover and articulate the various educational traditions that teachers and schools consciously draw upon or reject in the course of constructing and marketing their educational 'identities' at a time of rapid socio-economic change and educational reform.

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Data for the study have been drawn principally from interviews with 80 teachers—including headteachers—at nine schools across the 5–18 age range, followed up by focus group interviews at the same schools. The interview data have been supported throughout by informal observations of the participating schools and informal discussions with teachers, as well as by analysis of participating schools' public documentation (e.g. government inspection reports; the schools' web pages and prospectuses; whole-school policy documents).

### Defining the Terms: Eclecticism and Pragmatism in Teachers' Pedagogic Identities

This current article draws on some of our interview data to discuss ways in which teachers perceive and experience their work in the light of conflicting views as to what constitutes good educational practice. In particular, the article considers the extent to which teachers in English schools may be becoming more consciously and deliberately *eclectic* and *pragmatic* than previously, and less obviously *ideological* or *political* in the construction of their professional identities.

The selection of the terms 'eclectic' and 'pragmatic' to describe both teachers' practice and the ways in which teachers identify themselves professionally arises out of a principled rejection of two other terms—'compliant' and 'resistant'—that we used in the initial analysis of our interview data (see also Pollard *et al.*, 1994, p. 100; Grace, 1995). We employed these terms by way of recognizing that some teachers came across in interview—and indeed often actively represented themselves on such occasions—as significantly oppositional to public policy, while others seemed generally content, albeit sometimes grudgingly, to put into practice whatever was imposed upon them.

While the provisional categorisations 'compliant' and 'resistant' helped us sort and code our interview data in the first phase of analysis, we quickly realised that they were insufficient for our purposes, even when placed at either end of a 'resistant-compliant' continuum (Pollard *et al.*, 1994), and that they were actually masking a wide and complex variety of professional '*positionings*' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Davies & Harre, 1990; Burr, 1995). Equally worrying was the possibility that they were also obscuring a range of less obvious but profoundly significant *issues* that we needed to address in our study—not least, the issue of the possible 'depoliticisation' of teachers, to which we shall return later. A more helpful—and, we felt, more accurate—way of categorising our respondents' professional identifications (a way strengthened by virtue of the fact that the categories were suggested, unprompted, by several of the respondents themselves) was in terms of *eclecticism* and *pragmatism*. The central reason for this was that while very few of the teachers we spoke to openly declared themselves as either wholesale supporters or wholesale rejecters of government reforms in education, almost all of our respondents talked of the ways in which they had modified previous practice to 'bring it in line with' current policy, or had found ways of incorporating current policy into a largely unaltered continuing practice (effectively, what Pollard *et al.* [1994] describe as 'incorporation'). In arriving at such accommodations, these teachers had clearly been involved in making selections or *reselections* from a range of educational 'traditions', and they had clearly been making those selections partly as a matter of achieving preferred pedagogic identities (Convery, 1999), partly in a spirit of compromise—in some instances more willingly entered into than in others—in which preferred pedagogies were perceived as under threat. (See also Bernstein's [1996] notion of the 'pedagogic palette'.) Just as our movement from 'resistant' and 'compliant' towards 'eclectic' and 'pragmatic' as terms and tools of analysis had its specific history in the

research study, so too has our subsequent use of the words 'eclectic' and 'pragmatic' themselves. Whereas in the beginning we used these terms somewhat loosely and fairly interchangeably, we have come first to recognise an important difference between the two terms in general use, and second—as we shall illustrate—to begin to use the terms in order to differentiate between different kinds of teacher identification within different kinds of educational discourse.

In general use, then, we continue to use the term 'eclecticism' to describe the way in which teachers make choices from a wide range of educational traditions, philosophies, theories and practices available to them which may, within the terms and frameworks of previous perspectives, appear to have at best only tenuous philosophical or ideological connections between them. While in the past, for instance, we might have expected teachers who opposed school uniform to be equally opposed to setting students according to notions of ability, and to favour student-centred over front-of-class teaching—in each case, perhaps, on the same ideological grounds of *egalitarianism*—our interviews with teachers in the current study demonstrated that no such assumptions could be made, and that teachers would often support school uniform (for example) while they opposed academic setting, or would happily mix student-centred classroom activity with substantial amounts of front-of-class teaching.

The term 'pragmatic' we came to use to define the *reasons and motivations* behind the eclectic selections that teachers were making. *Why*, for example, did different teachers favour or oppose school uniform, mixed-ability teaching, or certain forms of classroom practice and organisation? Why were some generally in favour of recent government reforms in education, others generally oppositional to them and others ambivalent towards them? What accounted for apparent ideological contradictions in the choices that some of these teachers were making? And to what extent was the eclecticism of some teachers entered into more proactively and positively than that of others?

In developing our thinking about teacher eclecticism and pragmatism, and in subsequently considering the implications of teachers' consciously and deliberately identifying themselves professionally through the use of these terms, we have taken our lead from Coldron and Smith (1999), who suggest that teacher identities are 'partly given and partly achieved' by '*active location in social space*' (Coldron & Smith, 1999, p. 711, emphasis added). Social space is conceived by Coldron and Smith as 'an array of possible relations that one person can have to others'. Some of these relations, they argue, are conferred by 'inherited social structures and categorizations', while others are 'chosen or created by the individual' (1999, p. 711).

Coldron and Smith suggest that policies that 'impose greater degrees of uniformity and conformity' (we might point here to such things as recent educational policies in the UK that have led to the proliferation of competences, standards and OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) assessment criteria, not to mention the National Curriculum for England and Wales) 'threaten to impoverish the notion of active location, restricting the number of potential positions the teacher might assume' (1999, p. 711). This notion of teachers achieving professional identities through actively positioning themselves is related by Coldron and Smith to the analyses of *tradition* carried out by MacIntyre (1981) and Taylor (1989), wherein traditions are characterised as 'ways of acting and thinking ... patterned into practices and sets of practices' (1999, p. 713). In this configuration, teachers, as active agents, position themselves 'within [a] plurality of related resources [or traditions] in response to needs that arise from an assessment of the circumstances in which they find themselves' (p. 714). They are thus (p. 721) 'active participants in a rich array of educational traditions'.

Though an opposition to reification and closure makes us reluctant to talk of 'identities' as such, Coldron and Smith's account of the development of teacher identities and the function of educational traditions in this process is very close to our own practical definition of professional pragmatism. It also serves, however, to draw what, for us, has become an important distinction between, on the one hand, feeling free and able (however illusory that freedom and ability might be) to make choices on the bases of assessments of current situations and circumstances against a background of current skills, understandings and experience, and, on the other hand, feeling forced into making decisions with which one is not necessarily happy through being overly constrained by current situations and circumstances. (See also Giddens's reference [1991, p. 5] to the interplay between 'globalising influences' and 'personal dispositions', in which individuals are compelled 'to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options'.) To refer again to Coldron and Smith's account, not only might some teachers be severely restricted in their choice of identifications or positionings by such matters as increased government control or increased student disobedience; they might also find themselves pushed into some kind of professional identity *crisis*.

### Principled and Contingent Pragmatism

It is with Coldron and Smith's analysis in mind that we have not only chosen to use the term 'pragmatic' to distinguish the *practice* of selectivity (what we have earlier called *eclecticism*) from its *purpose(s)*, but have also come to identify two different *kinds* of pragmatism describing two different kinds of contrasting professional identification: that is to say, 'principled pragmatism', in which pedagogical eclecticism is characterised by an emphasis on the relations 'chosen or created by the individual' (see also Larse-Freeman's parallel notion [1987] of 'principled eclecticism' related to specific pedagogical practice), and 'contingent pragmatism', in which pedagogical eclecticism appears to be guided more by 'inherited social structures and categorizations' (Coldron & Smith, 1999, p. 711). While teacher agency is a key feature of both kinds of pragmatism, and while individual teachers may draw on both principled and contingent pragmatism in their professional practice and development, our research has identified at either end of the 'principled–contingent' continuum two kinds of teacher identification that appear significantly different from one another in their response and orientation to ongoing educational reform and societal change. For this reason, we use the descriptor '*principled pragmatism*' to describe the identifications of teachers who, regardless of the extent to which their choices may be unconsciously guided by 'external' constraints, *self-present* as decision-making individuals with a clear professional plan and purpose that guide those decisions. Often, though not exclusively, such teachers inscribe their pragmatism within terms of 'effectiveness', linking it strongly to academic performance and outcomes. We prefer to use the descriptor '*contingent pragmatism*', on the other hand, when teachers illustrate very visibly and often quite uncomfortably in their narratives a sense of compromise or uncertainty in their eclecticism—a sense, that is, of consciously being in a state of largely enforced *adjustment*.

### Exemplification 1: Principled Pragmatism

To illustrate this difference with reference to interview data, the following provides an example of what we might call 'the teacher as principled pragmatist'. This example is drawn from a set of 72 fully transcribed interviews with a wide variety of primary and

secondary school classroom teachers, covering the full range of age, experience and responsibilities. It is chosen on the basis of its representativeness of the professional and philosophical positionings articulated by a substantial majority of the sample as a whole, all of whom were invited to elaborate their positions in relation to various aspects of educational reform, to the central purposes of formal education, and to policies regarding school uniform, classroom organisation and discipline. Typically, though not exclusively, this majority comprised younger, less experienced teachers, several of whom—including the teacher cited—expressed an intention to review their work options after periods of three to five years, with the possibility of leaving the teaching profession to embark on alternative careers.

### Edward

*Edward is a young social studies and humanities teacher, now in his sixth year of teaching. His teaching philosophy owes much both to his pre-service training course and to a 'home upbringing that impacted on what I thought education was about'. Thus, from an early age he came to believe that 'the more education you receive the better it is for you' and that 'the only status you can have in our society is educational qualifications'. This belief in the value of education per se may help to explain Edward's repeated emphasis in interview on the importance of his students' achieving good examination results and doing well academically, while a complementary belief, in the function of education as 'expanding the mind of the individual' in ways that lead to a 'fuller understanding of the world' and lead to a greater tolerance of other people, may help to explain his considerable interest in the pastoral aspects of education and his own role as a form tutor.*

*The translation of Edward's educational philosophy into what might be termed a teaching style involves the rejection of the 'traditional–progressive' dichotomy through which teachers often identified themselves when Edward was a school student himself. As Edward puts this:*

*I wouldn't fit easily into any of those labels. I try to look back on each of those approaches and use parts of them both ... I would say I am a happy medium of traditional and progressive ... Traditional—you can see the chairs in rows; but progressive in the sense that I'm ... keen on allowing students to speak for themselves.*

*Edward's pedagogical eclecticism is explained:*

- partly by his focus on 'the end' of education (good examination results, a fuller understanding of the world, expanding the mind) rather than the means;
- partly by a view that students learn differently from one another and that younger students in particular learn differently from older ones;
- partly by a belief that his students are particularly 'difficult' and need firm but flexible management within a 'more structured, traditional approach'.

*This latter belief is linked by Edward to a self-perception of having become less 'naïve' and more 'realistic' than at the start of his teaching career, and having developed into a more 'professional', less 'idealistic' teacher.*

*Edward's personal change in teaching style is reflected in many aspects of his practice and self-presentation. During his early days at the school, for example, he would, he says, dress casually, eschew front-of-class teaching, and adopt a relatively*

*relaxed form of self-presentation in the classroom. His 'new realism', however, suggested to him that alternative self-presentation and pedagogic strategies might be more successful in engaging and retaining his students' interest, particularly in view of the fact that he was a young teacher and looked young for his age. Consequently, he began to wear a suit and tie and to develop a 'firm persona' with 'tighter control over the beginnings and ends of lessons'. This new, less student-centred style of classroom teaching, which, says Edward, demanded less effort in terms of preparing resources, enabled him to devote more time to pastoral work with his own tutor group, which previously, he felt, had suffered against the demands of his subject teaching.*

*Edward's 'reinvention' (to use his word) of himself as a teacher is occasionally described by him in terms of contrast and dissimilarity with other members of the teaching profession, including, centrally, other teachers at his present school. While he is reluctant to criticise colleagues, he is happy to talk about his initial 'shock' on entering teaching at 'how lacking in academic rigour most teachers appeared to be', and suggests that most of his colleagues are 'fairly naive in terms of educational issues' and 'fairly complacent' about teachers' status and pay. In this way, Edward sets himself up as something of a new breed of professional surrounded by older teachers whose attitudes and approaches belong to a bygone era.*

*In contrast to these reservations about the practice of some other teachers at his school, Edward is generally more positive about recent academic-related government reforms and about the ways in which they have impacted on his practice and experience of work. He does feel very bitter about the public regard for teachers and the way in which poor levels of pay have been allowed to persist. However, he believes that much recent educational reform—in particular, the proliferation and rigour of government inspections—has 'increased the effectivity of the profession' and, in personal terms, 'helped me to sharpen up a lot in how I teach and to be a lot more effective in putting ideas across to the students'. Where Edward has problems with change, it tends to be where he sees it abused or taken to extremes. Thus, while he is in favour of drives to improve examination results, he is concerned that this can put too much unacknowledged pressure on classroom teachers, particularly when it is underfunded, and he declares himself suspicious of the 'back to basics' agenda, which he feels undermines the judgement of professional teachers, oversimplifies the educational issues, and appears to promote mechanistic, 'uninventive' modes of teaching and learning. He also worries about the constituency of the National Curriculum, and the promotion—as he sees it—of technical and vocational subjects and courses at the expense of (for example) the social sciences.*

Edward's testimony is typical of many of our respondents in his recognition of and willingness to draw upon a range of educational traditions and discourses, and in his awareness—indicated, for example, in statements like 'I try to look back on each of those approaches and use parts of them both'—that this is precisely what he is doing. Edward is thus able to perceive his own pedagogic mission not only in terms of helping his students develop academically, but also in broadening their minds in ways that are not restrictively academic, and in encouraging them to be more tolerant of other human beings. He finds no contradiction in adopting the 'traditionalist' practice of sitting his students in rows—and therefore restricting their opportunities for student–student dialogue—while pursuing a broader aim of bringing about improved socialisation and cooperation, arguing that he needs to achieve discipline first if he is subsequently to be able to teach in the way he really wants to.

We might say that Edward comes across as a teacher making his own informed evaluations of and choices from a range of possibilities, seldom completely rejecting or completely accepting any of these but approaching each one critically and refusing to be labelled by himself or anybody else as a particular kind of classroom practitioner. There is a clear sense of purpose and agency in Edward's observations—a feeling that choices are still there to be made. In Edward's personal narrative, for example, he configures himself as someone who has moved from a well-meaning but naïve teacher to a more 'realistic', tougher teacher who is now more likely to get the empowering results he has always been after. While he is both 'resistant' about some local and national policies and 'compliant' in relation to others, neither his compliance nor his resistance makes him particularly uncomfortable or compromises his self-image as the teacher able to make choices. Where he complies (as in the case of government inspections), it is usually out of genuine agreement, and where he resists (as in the cases of school uniform or the over-vocational nature of the National Curriculum), he is generally happy to do so at the personal and local level, apparently experiencing minimal impact on his practice.

## Exemplification 2: Contingent Pragmatism

Although Edward's eclecticism was, as has already been indicated, common to a substantial majority of the teachers interviewed, not all were as comfortable as him with educational reform or with current trends in education or, indeed, with local (school) policy or perceived developments in social behaviour among their students. Many teachers, for example—frequently older, more experienced teachers who had previously become used to different ways of perceiving and approaching the educational enterprise—felt that they were being forced to make compromises rather than actively pursuing choices: that is to say, of making necessary but not always welcome adjustments to their practice in order to respond best to external pressures from central government, from other teachers, or indeed, from students and their parents. Such teachers we describe as identifying themselves, professionally and through interview, more frequently within the notion of *contingent pragmatism*. In their case, the emphasis in interview responses tends to be on the stories behind their compromises rather than on the reasons for their educational choices. Another way of putting this is to say that whereas the teachers we have described as principled pragmatists appear—to themselves and to others—to be proactive in their pragmatism, in the forms of pragmatism we have described as contingent, teachers' eclecticism appears to be essentially reactive.

The following exemplification is again drawn for the typicality of its professional and philosophical orientations, though on this occasion from a relatively small cohort of 'troubled' teachers in the main sample, who were united by quite powerful expressions of professional and personal unease in relation to one or more aspects of recent educational reform that they felt had impacted negatively on their classroom experience and practice. The exemplification includes a number of instances, indicative of the range of concerns expressed across this cohort, in which the teacher's eclecticism is founded on such contingent pragmatism. Even though his pragmatism appears at other times to be more principled in its construction, the overall picture is of a teacher who feels forced into repositionings with which he is critically uncomfortable. Graeme's testimony articulates with particular clarity a common concern of respondents in this category, concerning the difficulty not only of managing societal and policy change in the workplace, but of having to do so with lower energy levels.

## Graeme

Graeme has been in teaching for nearly 25 years—a career spent at just two secondary schools in the same area of a major city. Having qualified at a small training college in the 1970s, he began his career as an English and drama teacher, and continues to work within the English Department at his current school. After six years of teaching, however, he opted to specialise in the pastoral aspects of education, and has been a Head of Year ever since.

Having experienced what he calls an ‘appalling’ education himself, Graeme rather drifted into teaching with a tentative vision of ensuring that some students at least got a better deal out of the system than he had. He still maintains that his own school experiences—in particular, the more negative ones—have helped him to understand his own students’ feelings and needs, especially in years 9 and 10 when they are going through the strains and stresses of puberty. This feeling of being able to empathise with his students has helped to keep Graeme in a job that for many years he ‘enjoyed tremendously’. Recently, however, he has become disillusioned with teaching, finding it increasingly less rewarding to teach the younger students, and he is currently, at the age of 49, looking for a move out of the profession altogether in order to ‘spend ten years doing something else—anything—I don’t know [what], but totally different’.

The reasons given by Graeme for his disillusionment with teaching are varied. Partly, it is a matter of age and a perceived drop in energy levels and ‘desire’. This has, in turn, led to his becoming less tolerant and ‘more tetchy’ in the classroom. Perceived changes within his school, within education generally and within society as a whole have also been contributory factors. Graeme feels, for instance, that he has lived through increasing levels of internal and external bureaucracy, with ‘so much paperwork going round that I feel half the time I am not getting on with the job’. The increased bureaucracy is itself perceived by Graeme as part of a larger picture of teachers’ having to complete more and more work and—particularly in his own case, where he has to combine substantial pastoral duties with a heavy teaching load—having to fulfill too many different roles to be able to do any one job properly. A further perceived difficulty is the increasing pressure from inside and outside the school ‘to do better and better and to achieve better and better results’, including, centrally, better and better examination results. As Graeme says, ‘I feel as a teacher I have got to get those results, all the time’. This pressure has, in his view, led to there being less and less time for the ‘socialisation aspect [of education]’—what he calls ‘the preparation for life’. He is both concerned and depressed that the notion of a ‘liberal education’ no longer exists, and (echoing the fears expressed elsewhere by Edward) that ‘we are getting terribly vocationally minded, even at year 9, [when] children have ideas of careers foisted upon them ... which I think is terrible’.

Feelings of being less tolerant because of age, and of being increasingly pressurised by demands from inside and outside the institution, are exacerbated by changes that Graeme feels have occurred over the years in teacher–student and teacher–parent relationships. Although he is aware that his perception may be affected by an increasing lack of tolerance that may have nothing to do with the job itself, he does think that students’ behaviour ‘seems to have deteriorated’ and that teachers are now subjected to ‘more verbal abuse’ than before. He also believes that a new emphasis on teacher accountability, though essentially and ideologically a good thing, is not without its problems in terms of parent–school interactions. Parents may have become ‘more aware’ of educational issues, he argues, but he feels that they are still treated ‘as

outsiders'. Furthermore, he is concerned that greater accountability to parents has led to greater accountability to management, and that, as a consequence, 'management are harder on teachers than they used to be and won't automatically back a teacher up'.

The increased pressures experienced by Graeme have undoubtedly contributed to a change of teaching style and philosophy on his part that he appears to be less than happy about:

*I have become less progressive: I have become a reactionary, I find ... I have become less liberal ... in my thinking about education. As a teacher, I have become more abrasive.*

*These changes of philosophy and style have not entirely been forced upon Graeme by the changed circumstances of his work: they are also, in part, based on the evidence of his experience. On issues related to the National Curriculum, school uniform, and school traditions and rituals, for example, he adopts what he chooses to call a 'balanced' view, happy to see and discuss the pros and cons in each case, and—despite his regret that new teachers seem to be less 'political' than they used to be—declining to take a straightforward or 'politically correct' view on any of these issues. Thus, while he is 'anti' the National Curriculum because it places too much emphasis on academic subjects and restricts teachers' opportunities to pursue their own educational agendas, he is, like Edward, generally in favour of the 'tightening up' he believes it has created. While he sees school uniform as being problematic to enforce and, in the case of his current school, 'an awful mishmash', and while he does not believe in the notion of its fostering 'a corporate identity', he maintains that it makes life far easier for parents and helps increase a school's popularity.*

*Interestingly, in the case of school uniform, Graeme appears to bring no ideological perspective either to his arguments in favour of it or to his objections to it, approaching the subject purely within the context of local issues related to his own school. To an extent, this same brand of pragmatism is invoked in his discussion of mixed ability: 'I used to be totally pro mixed-ability, but our results are improving all the time, and that has come from setting'.*

*Despite his concern that teachers are becoming less political, that the pressures of the job are focusing too much attention on the academic side of education over the social and the pastoral, and that he himself is becoming 'a reactionary', Graeme appears to have little difficulty in supporting setting on academic grounds, and putting the social issues to one side—precisely, it seems, because of the pressures he feels to ensure that, in the interests of achieving a more comfortable life, his students achieve 'good results'.*

There are many areas in which Edward and Graeme have the same concerns and much the same views. Both, for example, are worried about the possible harmful effects of parent power and increased accountability; both have an ambivalence towards the National Curriculum that includes a fear that the emphasis in schools is becoming overly vocational; both claim to have a 'balanced' view on such key issues as school uniform and the setting of students according to notions of ability (Edward, for example, describes himself elsewhere in interview as 'no longer a strong believer either way' on the subject of school uniform, and as 'a small fan of mixed ability teaching' in his own subject area); and both have a leaning towards—and a fear for the future of—the 'socialising', 'pastoral' aspects of education. Whereas Edward navigates his way through a sea of possibilities and around the less welcome rocks and islands that sometimes obstruct his path, however, Graeme self-presents as a drowning man not

even inclined to clutch at straws. Although he can, like Edward, be described as pedagogically eclectic, his is, *by and large*, a very different kind of eclecticism, in which selections are made—or at least are often perceived by Graeme as being made—out of desperation rather than choice, rendering him a teacher for whom (Troman & Woods, 2000, p. 10) the ‘repeated reinvention of the [professional] self’ is, indeed, ‘a stressful and convoluted process’. Graeme’s accommodations (modifying his own practice to enable him to cope with increasingly badly behaved students or to fulfill his statutory obligations) and assimilations (attempting—though with rather less enthusiasm and success than most of the ‘resisters’ in our study—to incorporate alien elements into an enduring ‘preferred practice’) are thus far less comfortably achieved than Edward’s—so much so, indeed, that (in an interesting comparison with some of the younger teachers with their ‘five year *plans*’) he is seriously thinking of ‘giving up’ teaching altogether in favour of ‘anything’.

Graeme comes across as contingently pragmatic precisely because his choices seem, to himself and in interview, to be overly constrained. He is always, it seems, the one having to change, always confronted by key aspects of reform to which he is in significant measure opposed, increasingly victimised within an ever-increasing workload, and struggling desperately to cope with increasingly disruptive students at a time of his life when he feels least equipped to do so. In Graeme’s case, resistance, it seems, can be a resistance of the mind only—a resistance, that is, that can no longer be translated into meaningful action at either the local (school/classroom) or the global (local and national policy) level—while too many of his compliances sit uncomfortably with his philosophy and practice, forcing him reluctantly to become the more disciplinarian teacher that Edward, by contrast, sees himself as having become out of careful and sensible choice. We might say that Graeme represents a small but significant section of our respondents for whom (Marris, 1975, p. 16) ‘Change threatens to invalidate [their previous] experience, robbing them of the skills they have learned and confusing their purposes, upsetting the subtle rationalizations and compensations by which they [previously] reconciled the different aspects of their situation.’

### **The Importance of Eclecticism and Pragmatism as Signifiers of Identification**

Having noted that teachers in our study preferred to describe themselves as pragmatic and eclectic rather than (say) traditional or progressive, and having acknowledged our own adoption of these terms as categorisers of teacher identities, we remain cautious of imputing too much to this apparent ‘identification shift’. We do not want to suggest, for example, that teacher identities have fundamentally changed during the course of the last 20 years, or indeed to support the notion on which such a view might be predicated—i.e. that identities themselves can be reified and viewed as having any degree of permanence or stability (Maclure, 1993; Hall, 1997; Boler, 1999). Furthermore, there is no evidence that teachers and schools are any more or less ‘pragmatic’ or ‘eclectic’ today than they ever were; that is to say, choosing to describe themselves through these signifiers does not mean that the signifieds ‘behind them’ have not previously existed.

We are not denying, either, that pragmatism and eclecticism may be necessary and essential features of educational practice as long as there is a visible disjunction between the essentially utilitarian aims and philosophies of public policy and the generally more altruistic aims of classroom practitioners, or implying that now there is an *actual* ‘balance’ or ‘consensus’ in the relationship between official and unofficial educational

policy as it impacts on classroom practice where before there was an 'either-or' polarisation. It is true that schools may previously have marketed themselves very consciously as 'traditional' or 'progressive', and that teachers within schools may have used one or other of these terms to identify themselves to colleagues, to students, to parents and to themselves. However, experience tells us that these identifications were never clear-cut, and certainly were not presented without modification. Schools that previously marketed themselves as 'progressive', for example, were by no means of a kind, some incorporating into their style and public representation aspects and practices that might equally appear in the marketing of more 'traditional' schools—for instance, a belief in formal school uniform and strong discipline—while others openly challenged a much wider range of received wisdom and validated practices—through, for instance, a wholesale *rejection* of school uniform. Similarly, schools and teachers labelling themselves as traditional might have done so through a variety of appeals to specific aspects of old grammar school or public school modes of curriculum content, student organisation, ritualistic and ceremonial traditions and so on, but were unlikely to ignore developments in understandings of the nature of learning and a corresponding understanding of the implications for assessment and pedagogy. In other words, schools and teachers who identified themselves as traditional or progressive did so, we would argue, as a kind of shorthand that may have sent out an immediate message but that bore no true correspondence to the complexity and eclecticism of the individual school's or teacher's actual philosophy, policy and practice.

The point about eclecticism and pragmatism, then, is not that they are *new*, but rather, that it is new for teachers to adopt the terms so ubiquitously and enthusiastically as *identifying signs* in the same way that 'traditionalism' and 'progressivism' were adopted as identifying signs in the 1970s and 1980s. *We are interested, that is, in why teachers use particular signifiers of identification at different moments in educational history, and, in particular, why 'pragmatism' and 'eclecticism' are such popular and powerful signifiers of identification in the present conjuncture.*

There could, of course, be all manner of possible explanations, many of them relatively straightforward, as to why this might be so. The more obvious of these include: (a) that teachers have simply come to realise that a pragmatic pedagogical approach, in which one draws on proven good practice from within a range of pedagogic discourses, simply does result in more effective classroom practice—a view that already has a considerable history of debate within, for example, foreign language teaching (see, for example, Girard's argument [1986, p. 11] for the need for an 'eclectic attitude on the part of the foreign language teacher, who should endeavour to get the maximum benefit from all the methods and techniques at his or her disposal, according to the special needs and resources of his/her pupils at any given time'); (b) that teachers are aware of the bad press given to the terms 'traditional' and 'progressive', and are keen to distance themselves publicly from these signifiers, if not always, in practice, from their signifieds; (c) that the rejection of terms like 'traditional' and 'progressive' in favour of a philosophy of 'what matters is what *works*' (Hartley, 1999, p. 310) is part of a broader rebellion—reflected in the rhetoric of recent UK government policy—against what Boler has called 'the embedded binary oppositions of Western thought' (Boler, 1999, p. 178); (d) that many teachers have, effectively, been 'compelled' into pragmatic policies and practices, whatever gloss they may choose to put on it, merely in order to survive both the conflicting ethical and political demands of the job and what Huberman (1983) calls the 'classroom press'—a work overload that promotes on-the-hoof pragmatism as a way of coping with the immediate and relentless difficulties of classroom life.

Each of these possibilities was mooted by respondents, as is indicated in the following observations of one primary school teacher in our sample:

There are a lot of good things about the child-centred seventies educational climate that we've been keen to hang on to, but we have also grasped some initiatives which ... are actually taking education back towards a more traditional approach ... I think that the problem with education too often in the past is that it ... polarised politically ... And because New Labour haven't polarised it, in a sense it's a bit more difficult to make those distinctions. I think that people [now] are much more pragmatic in the methods they use. So things like pupil grouping don't become a political issue so much. You are actually looking at the evidence, you are looking at the research and what works best for the kids, what are the pros and cons.

We believe, however, that such explanations are not sufficient in themselves to explain the *popularity* among our respondents of the voluntary voicing of pragmatism as a signifier of identification. Of particular interest here is the extent to which the term is invoked not just in relation to what we might call pedagogic practice (for instance, matters of internal classroom organisation, or debates over small group work versus front-of-class teaching), but in relation to what we might call organisational and curricular matters (for example, mixed ability versus setting, or debates about school uniform), which sit less comfortably within a 'best-bits-from-everything' model.

Given also that our respondents' repeatedly positive references to pragmatism and typically negative references to 'politics' were often laced (as with Graeme) with a sense of 'being done to' (Smyth *et al.*, 1999, p. 1) or (as with Edward) via an account of quite radical *individual* reidentifications, we are inclined to seek additional explanations for the popularity of pragmatism as a signifier of identification.

One such explanation is that teacher narratives, in which the teacher self-identifies as having moved from an 'extremist', 'irrational', 'political' and perhaps naïve outlook and position to one of 'balance', 'rationality', 'maturity' and 'common sense', may be being used to mask a hidden reality suggested elsewhere in our data, that teachers have become far less openly and actively oppositional to unliked public educational policy—far less 'political' as some teachers put it—and that there may a corresponding guilt and denial on many teachers' part as they are obliged to put such policies into practice at the local level (see also Burr, 1995.) As some of our respondents seemed to suggest in this respect, 'subversion' (a form of underground resistance that seeks to gradually undermine what it feels it cannot more immediately change) may be seen as having replaced more open, direct forms of oppositional action: one way, perhaps, in which the 'positionings' described by Coldron and Smith may have become 'impoverished'. Arguing a not dissimilar case, though perhaps in stronger terms than our own research currently warrants, McLaren (1986, p. 87) has suggested that 'Our identities [as teachers] have been respatialised and invested in new forms of desire. Our agency has been dispersed on the predatory horizon of micro-politics, *with no common understanding of oppression or collective strategy to challenge it*' (emphasis added).

### The Discourse of Pragmatism and the 'Depoliticisation' of Teachers

One reading of Edward's and Graeme's accounts might lead us to conclude that here are two people who, in their different ways, have abandoned outdated polarities such as progressivism and traditionalism in favour of negotiating circumstances and situations

sensibly and/or contingently as those circumstances and situations arise. On the other hand, if we problematise their responses by subjecting them to what might be called a 'narrational' reading (Convery, 1999), we might arrive at a different understanding.

The 'narrational reading' takes the view that professional narratives—as expressed, for example, in interview—do not necessarily 'reveal' or 'describe' the history of the respondent's developing professional identity, but rather serve to 'create' or 'construct' a '*preferred* identity' (Convery, 1999, p. 137): an identity, that is, that will sit comfortably within the respondent's conscience and that may also be acceptable to fellow professionals from whom one would not wish to alienate oneself. In constructing such identities, people will select critical moments from their past experience in order to construct stories of development in which they move from one identity—often configured in the present as *undesirable*—to a new identity, often configured in the present as *desirable* (see also Gergen, 1989; Harre, 1989). They might also (we would suggest) adopt contrived *allegiances* to certain wider discourses, within which any changes that might be interpreted by an 'outsider' as undesirable are rendered more easily defensible.

To apply the narrational reading to the testimonies of teachers like Edward and Graeme, we might suggest that these professionals are not simply taking a 'sensible', 'what works' stance towards their practice that may happen (as, most notably, in the case of Edward) to chime with some key strands of public policy, but that they are, rather, buying into an emergent, dominant *discourse of pragmatism* manifested, for example, in the current politics of 'Third Wayism' espoused by the UK's New Labour government (Blair, 1998). Within this discourse, pragmatism—though rarely acknowledged as such—becomes a force of conservatism, representing an '*escape* from self-definition' (Toynbee, 2001) in terms of political orientation, in which politics as we have previously understood it, characterised by argument, passion and debate, is effectively 'killed off'. Pragmatism, in short, becomes a desirable orientation *in itself*—an ideology at whose centre, paradoxically, is a critical *opposition* to ideology and therefore, by implication, to politics.

According to this interpretation, pragmatism within the educational context takes on a far broader and more far-reaching significance than the kinds of 'pedagogic eclecticism' described by Girard (1986) and Larse-Freeman (1987). In effect, it becomes utilised as another kind of 'coping strategy' (Woods, 1985), serving as a substitute for—or even a representation of—a lack of active political opposition to government policy and societal change, and even of tacit support for an imposed set of values, philosophies, pedagogies, curricula and ethics that 'deep down' may be felt by the teacher to be faulty, and whose implementation may give rise to suppressed feelings of failure, frustration and guilt.

To put this in more concrete terms, we might say that many teachers—including more experienced practitioners like Graeme, who may feel, in hindsight, that they won battles but are still losing the War—find it extremely difficult to accept that much of the practice they are currently constrained into pursuing has its origins in, and takes its impetus from, market forces and values rather than their own views as to what education should be for and how it should be experienced. To use Ball's terminology (1999, p. 7), we might say that whereas Edward self-presents as a 'reformed' teacher who has internalised and taken shared ownership of the discourse of pragmatism, Graeme embodies the 'authentic' teacher, who 'absorbs' reform but not its underpinning ideology: a teacher who has not been 'remade', but who is struggling to survive within a changed educational and

professional 'context'. It is not inconceivable that teachers in this position, rather than confront the problem head-on, might find it easier to configure their altered practice within a normalised discourse of pragmatism, offering, as it does, a values- and pedagogy-based *rationale* for the shift that is immediately acceptable in terms of preferred individual teacher and whole-school identities.

Certainly, the repeated references to pragmatism and 'balance' in our own interviews would seem to support such a reading, as would the occasional but insistent suggestions of some of our more experienced respondents that 'teachers generally are less political now' and the reluctance of virtually all our respondents to engage in debates about school uniform or classroom organisation or curriculum developments at anything but the local level (i.e. in terms of what is appropriate 'in this school ... in these social conditions ... at this particular point in time'). Their references to the National Curriculum have also tended to eschew *fundamental* criticism and analysis, with opposition being almost invariably confined to issues of the volume of content, the speed of implementation and the abundance of attendant bureaucracy rather than addressing the nature of the curriculum's content itself or of its functions.

Whatever we may think of previous teacher identifications and practices, the repeated use of pragmatism as an epithet of identification leads us inevitably to ask: is pragmatism necessarily a good thing, truly indicative of a more balanced approach to teaching that seeks to select the best practice available? Or is it, rather, that teachers are buying into a political 'discourse of pragmatism', in which the inclination to mobilise for active, collective political opposition is diverted, in the way described by McLaren (1986), to more isolated engagements in the internal politics of their own institutions?

Without wishing to appear overly pragmatic ourselves, our own answer would be to suggest that pragmatic, eclectic approaches to teaching *can* be beneficial for teachers and students, but that there are also survival and political agendas to pragmatism and eclecticism that might prove rather *less* helpful and that we must also understand and address. In particular, we are anxious to assess whether—as some of our respondents seem to suggest—the adoption of the pragmatic stance as a coping strategy is leading to a professional *depoliticisation* of teachers and the teaching profession in the UK, in which healthy educational debate—including the adoption of oppositional stances—is being eroded and replaced by an all-pervasive politics of compromise. Our early readings are that this may well be the case, but that the erosion may not be permanent or irreversible.

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